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The humor of William Dean Howells

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THE HUMOR OF WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

by

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FOREWORD

It is the purpose of this study to analyze the humor of William Dean Howells and, if possible, to capture something of its elusive spirit. To do this, the nature, purpose and technic of it are separately considered insofar as it is possible to do so with an indivisible quality.

Naturally, this paper makes no mistaken claim to be the concluding word on this subject. Too many more acute analyses have tried to do so, only to meet with partial success, if not total failure. It is therefore for both the sins of omission and commission that the writer asks the reader to deal with it as Howells' humor would have dealt with it, according to its weaknesses rather than its deserts.

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THE HUMOR OF WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

Chapter I

THE MAN

In the year 1837, the very one in which the youthful Queen Victoria ascended the English throne to begin one of the most remarkable, and it might be added, respectable historical eras, there was born in the obscurity of a small Ohio town one of the eminent writers of her time, William Dean Howells. Like Trollope, another noted Victorian novelist, H owells learned the tolerance and the humanity that characterize his humor from the kind of life that might have soured a less genial nature, for the conditions of his boyhood were rigorous and ungromising. His father was the editor of a number of small country newspapers, which were more or less financial failures. It was the itinerant character of the elder Howells' career which made any amount of prolonged schooling impossible for William Dean. Though he was in later years to refuse a Harvard professorship and accept honorary degrees from Oxford, Yale and Columbia, the total number of Howells' school days would not amount to those in a year. This is amazing, when one reads his impeccable, fastidious English, which even that formidable purist, Henry James, admired.

Howells began his literary career as a legislative reporter of the Ohio State Journal of Columbus, Ohio in 1859. The next year he wrote a life of Abraham Lincoln for the latter's campaign for the presidency and was re-

warded with the American consulship at Venice. There he led a more or less desultory life, since his duties consisted mainly in reporting to the United States government the Confederate blockade runners that never came into the Venetian port. Needless to say, a budding literary career was not hampered by official duties. When W owells returned to Boston at the end of the Civil War, he settled there permanently with his family and devoted the rest of his life to literature. It is as a Boston belletrist that he is known, for in the eighties the literary reputation that accrued from residence in "the hub of the universe" and leadership therein had real significance. Howells became editor of The Atlantic Magazine in 1872 and later of Harper's Magazine. It was his critical work in The Easy Chair of the latter publication from 1886-1891 that did much to shape American literary tastes in the eighties. Championing the cause of realism in American literature, he stamped his name indelibly upon the movement, which partly through the impetus he gave to it still exists today. To him, is due much, if not all, the credit for popularizing realistic fiction in America. Besides his books of literary criticism, his work consists of thirty-six novels, some twenty farces and comedies, a great number of sketches, stories, poems, travel books and autobiographies.

He died in 1920 after having been acknowledged for many years the Dean of American Arts and Letters. As Clyde Fitch has well said, the eighties and the nineties were "the

H owells Age, and many who do not acknowledge it were affect-
ed by his unending struggle for truth in art." It is, per-
haps, hard to realize now the immense popularity and influ-
ence that were once his. He seems to have been loved by
everyone, with the exception of those arch rebels on the
staff of The American Mercury. Henry James, Mark Twain
and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow were among the many who felt
his peculiar personal charm which is reflected in his work.
To epitomize that charm, "He was so human" as Lowell said
of Agassiz. Howells was a whimsical genius, an urbane and
genial personality.

Chapter II

THE NATURE OF HOWELLS' HUMOR

Of all qualities of style, humor is the least definable, notwithstanding the fact that few writings about it begin without elaborate definitions. Since Aristotle, philosophers have been indefatigable in their efforts to discover the true essence of the comic and have by no means exhausted either their efforts or audiences. Evidently, then, in view of their continued efforts, no definition wholly satisfactory in its completeness has ever been reached by any of them. However, several outstanding theories have stood the test of time and shall be included here on the basis of their merits. The reader must be philosophically resigned to accept the half loaf, because it is better than no loaf at all.

It might be well to begin with a brief history of the word and the spirit. Humor is an old word, which has experienced as curious a shifting in meaning as any other word in the English language. In old physiology, it was one of the four fluids conceived by doctors as entering into the constitution of the body and determining by their relative proportions a person's health and temperament. Hence it became one's disposition or state of mind; such as, good humor or ill humor. It was in this sense that Ben Jonson used it in his comedies, Every Man In His Humor and Every Man Out Of His Humor. Now, however, it implies only a gay or genial disposition, as it is used in this study. Humor has finally come to include the widest range of response in smile and

laughter and also to denote the most superior of emotions connected with the comic."[1]

Though the Greeks did not have a word for humor, the spirit existed in the comedies of one of their dramatists, Aristophanes, as a form of the comic; namely the incongruous. Greek Comedy was pure and simple enjoyment in the discomfiture of others. In Shakespeare's time, humor became an important part of both comedy and tragedy. The grisly humor of the graveyard scene in Hamlet is familiar to everyone. It was, however, not before the eighteenth century that humor was beginning to be recognized as distinctly different in spirit from the other forms of the comic with which it was always associated. It was then admirably described by Hegel, a German philosopher of that century:

"Incongruity from the comic is an objective certainty and actuality, a reality of which says by its own contradiction and evaporating therein no taint of bitterness, nor sense of misfortune whatever. It is the happy frame of mind, a whole condition of soul, which feels a power of itself can suffer the discrepancies of its aims."

Between Shakespeare and the nineteenth century there came a period in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that delighted much in true humor with real human nature and very little in humor. In the seventeenth century, the brilliant plays of the Restoration, the comedies and tragicomedies of Congreve and Sycherly preferred this form of the comic that is moral intellectual fun. Horace, too, (almost) alone the satirical spirit as her own; witness the Rape-lock of Daniel Defoe, a savage caricature of the Puritans

1 English Comedy, W.L.Phemister (Macmillan,1909) p.13

by a Cavalier. In the Augustan period of the eighteenth century, satire reached its fullest development. "Satire ran about the streets seeking new victims to impale. Slander lay in wait for every passerby. And sober ministers turned from writing sermons to enshrine pothouse tales in heroic couplets." [1] It was this abusive, violent time that produced the turbulent work of the American Revolutionary War poets, Philip Freneau and Joseph Trumbull, and A Modest Proposal by Jonathan Swift. The only notable exception in a time so out of joint was Oliver Goldsmith, whose genial humor in such a period is ample proof of his eccentricity. However, it is an eccentricity to which we owe The Good-Natured Man and She Stoops to Conquer, which are still notable, whereas the decadent and diseased wit of The Lady of Pleasure by Shirley and The Country Wife by Wycherly prohibits their popular presentation.

The advance of civilization has possibly tended to develop the more kindly sort of laughter. The Comic Spirit like other things, has been evoluting. Derision and ridicule are giving way to a more genial gaiety. By humor we have come to mean not the clumsy digging at the ribs, which provokes an outburst of uncontrollable laughter. Nor have the ancient terms, such as ludicrous, grotesque, incongruous, satire, fun, comic, or merriment, been found quite sufficient for this enlarging and improving sense of humor. Let us examine briefly what those older terms mean

[1] V.L.Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought, Vol. 2, p. 35.

in order to ascertain as clearly as possible the difference between them and humor. This is not to say, however, that modern humor does not contain some of these older elements. The baffling part about an analysis of humor is the impossibility of separating it completely from the other forms of the Comic Spirit. For example, one reviewer found the cause for her appreciation of Howells' humor to lie in his ability to see "different things alike."[1] Such an analysis is dismayingly close to naming incongruity as the essence of Howells' humor. So it must be admitted at the outset that humor is inseparable from the comic. However, there are some very vital differences to be considered after the following terms have been defined.

The first of these is incongruity, which, according to Lowell, humor is "in its first analysis." Aristotle maintained that incongruity was the true essence of the comic, which may explain the inferior position he placed comedy in relation to tragedy. If one refers to the dictionary, incongruity may be found to be the lack of compatibility of two things with one another; that is, they are inharmonious or disagreeing. The disparity in size of Mutt and Jeff, the two well-known comic strip characters is a simple indication of their creator's recognition of the effectiveness of this device to cause laughter. A British doctor, so undeservingly obscure that I do not

[1] Edith Thomas, Mr. Howells' Way of Saying Things (an article in Lippincott's Magazine, Vol.4, pp.643-7)

know his name, asserts that the greatest cause for laughter in the modern world has been a large hat on a small head or a small hat on a large head. Only the hatless condition of the Greeks can account for their apparent unconcern over it. The incongruous is one of the simplest forms of humor, having little or none of the intellectual quality of high comedy, since it is frequently dependent upon physical causes.

The second of these older forms existed also in the ancient world, for it, too, is described by Aristotle in the Poetics. This is the ludicrous, which he defined as "some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive." It is the broadly comical, manifested also in some physical way. As it is most obvious, it hardly ever fails of recognition. Consequently, it has little intellectual appeal and requires little subtlty to conceive.

Closely related to the ludicrous is the grotesque. It may be distinguished from the ugly or ludicrous, in that it is a distortion of the beautiful. In comedy, it is characterized by its emphasis upon abnormalities and the unnatural, since it is the natural and the beautiful twisted out of shape. Such, for example are the grotesque comic characters of Madge Wild-fire, the mad Scotch peasant girl in Scott's The Heart of Midlothian and Flibbertigibbet, the misshapen hunchback of Kenilworth. Extreme exaggeration and departure from the normal and real in behavior, appearance and personal traits may, in general, describe this

form of the comic.

A natural outgrowth of the ludicrous is satire, which concerns itself with pointing out the ludicrous in human behavior. The comedies of Moliere and Ben Jonson hold up the follies, affectations, absurdities and even the vices of men to scorn. Laughter at and not with the object is the usual and well-known distinction made between it and humor. Powerful as a weapon, important as a critic and censor, satire is, nevertheless, decidedly limited since it deals with only the inferiorities of human society and knows nothing of the joy of life. Superior to the cruder and older forms in its intellectual appeal and origin, it is, yet, inferior to humor in its emphasis upon what is worst in life. Satire is like Cyclops, the one-eyed giant of The Odyssey, powerful but hopelessly handicapped in its limited view of the universe.

Irony is closely related to satire in its strong intellectual quality, but it is a tool that must be exercised with greater care and skill than the latter. The bludgeoning, abuse and violence which characterize the method of satire are not to be used, for the prime requisite of irony is subtlty. George Meredith thus contrasts the two:

"If instead of falling foul of the ridiculous person with a satiric rod, to make him writhe and shriek aloud, you prefer to sting him under a semi-caress by which he shall in his anguish be rendered dubious whether anything indeed has hurt him, you are an engine of Irony." [1]

[1] George Meredith, The Idea of Comedy, an essay in The Works of Geo. Meredith, Vol.33 (Scribner, 1910)

Such are the older forms of the Comic Spirit, from which humor has developed, none of which can any longer be found sufficient to confine entirely the "expansive Force" of humor. It may be found to differ from them sometimes subtly, at other times obviously, but always unmistakably in any or all of the following four ways: first, humor is both intellectual and emotional in appeal and origin; second, it is not an exaggerated but a truthful representation of life; third, it is whimsical; and fourth, it finds much joy in life.

In considering where humor is bred "or in the heart or in the head," Carlyle borrows this conception from Jean Paul Richter in answer. He says, "True humor springs not more from the head than from the heart, it is not contempt, its essence is love, it issues not in laughter, but in smiles which lie far deeper." Humor, then, is both intellectual and emotional in appeal and origin. Springing from the keen brain of the humorist, it is enforced by his emotions. It has been said that humor is "warm and sincere emotion, which is directed by the light of reason." [1] That is to say that the humorist's intelligence enables him to see the ridiculous in human nature, but a warm and generous heart makes it possible for him to see it in a kind and genial light. For there is something elusively warm and cheerful about humor. It is at ease with the world, unruffled and undisturbed in temper by the general awkwardness

[1] Frances T. Russell, Satire in the Victorian Novel (Macmillan, 1920) p.45

of humanity. Being content to accept, for the most part, the world as it is and preferring to look for the good rather than the evil in it, it escapes the bitterness and the frustration of satire, that is always at odds with the universe. The affectations, the absurdities and the follies of man evoke only kindly laughter and reprimand from the humorists. For example, Howells' only excursions into the field of satire are much like his father's remonstrance when some juvenile indecorum of the younger Howells was reported to him, "Boys, consider yourselves soundly thrashed."

Thackeray says that humor is "love plus wit." Certainly, it is inspired by a genuine feeling of followship for man. Wisely or unwisely, Howells was ever ready to assert his neighbor's likeness to himself, though he knew his neighbor well. For in order to write humor, one must know the real world and "the children of this world" well enough not to expect too much of them, though you may still hope for good. It is thus in its emotional quality, its genuine feeling of love for man that humor differs from the purely intellectual manifestations of the Comic Spirit.

As it differs from these, which suffer from a superabundance of cold and unsympathetic intellectuality, so does humor differ from the Aristotelian forms of comedy which conspicuously exhibit a poverty, if not a complete absence, of the light of reason. Humor is an evenly balanced composite of both intellect and emotion, each of which acts as a check and curb upon the other, so that it escapes both the Scylla of popular sentimentality and the Charybdis of academic subtlety. It stands in strong need of good

1 D.G.Cooke, W.D.Howells, (Dutton, 1922) p.39

gray matter in the humorist's head for the "twists of the human heart" are not easy to follow, unless one has a keen and superior intelligence. True humor is concerned with much beneath the superficial and with much besides the grotesque and the incongruous of appearance.

Closely related to the intellectual and emotional quality of humor is its realism, for to the man of strong feeling and intelligence is given the fine gift of seeing life as it really is. As Rankin said in his essay, The Poetic Fallacy, those that "feel strongly and think strongly, see truly." Obviously, the ability to picture life and analyze character is a natural development of a strong sympathy with humanity and a thorough understanding of men. Without either of these powers, the humorist fails, for his aim is the delineation of real life. He is a critic of his times, whose value may be measured proportionately to his ability to "see truly." Humor, then, is always the absolute truth, for humor is laughter that is caused by seeing things as they really are. Melville Landon writes that "humorous writings are absolutely true descriptions of scenes and incidents really occurring." [1] That is why there is a sense of reality, if not reality itself, wherever there is true humor. The writers of comedy have come much nearer to being a mirror of their own times than have the tragic poets. For instance, the Greek comedies abound in local hits, references to events of the day, and the slang of the moment. I believe that it is to his humor, that Howells

[1] Melville Landon, Wit and Humor of the Age (Star, 1883) p. 9

cross some of his reputation as a realist.

Of course, one may secure reality without humor, as Theodore Dreiser does, but it is impossible to secure humor without reality. This is one of the chief differences between it and wit, which is always exaggeration and pure fancy, that sacrifices reality to brilliant expression. Such, for example, as was to be found in the decadent drama of the England of Charles II. The sparkling conversation of the characters of The Way of the World could not easily be sustained in real life. The Restoration comedy did its work too well and for this reason fails to capture the complete illusion of reality. Howells succeeds often where Congreve and Wycherly fail, for he never flinches from describing men in "his habitual mood of vacancy and tiresomeness." [1] It is in his sometimes rather painful representation of actuality that his best humor is to be found.

Howells' humor is whimsical. By whimsicality, I mean all modern humor as distinguished from that which is found before the end of the eighteenth century. The writers of this period suppressed themselves; they were impersonal; and they used heightened conventional language. But the romantic movement of the early nineteenth century changed all that and freed the individual from restraint. The new humor, though it might comprise all the earlier forms, was different because it had one element which the older forms lacked and which, like the onion in the salad bowl, an ecle-

[1] W.D. Howells, Their Wedding Journey, 1872

brated by one of its masters, Sidney Smith, "animates the whole." I refer to its unreluctant egoism. This is the humorist's shameless assumption that what is interesting to him must be interesting to the whole world. Such a point of view justifies the most fanciful and capricious humor in which any man may wish to indulge. It means that his personal ideas of what is humorous are as important as Aristotle's ideas. He is moved only by his own spirit of mirth. Like Puck, he finds that

> "Those things do best please me
> That befall preposterously."

The opportunities for merriment, then, are legion for each man finds the preposterous in many different ways. There is no essential likeness in the things that may appear comic. We laugh at pretense, at disappointed expectation, at inferiority, at the incongruous. But anything may seem incongruous. What is so is determined by our own peculiar way of looking at objects and seeing their relations. Humor is, then, completely personal.

Laughter is always associated with feelings of pleasure; be it scornful or sympathetic mirth. A certain physiologist recently attempted to convince somewhat dubious readers that the laugh originated in that stage of biological evolution when the highest form of life inhabited the sea and pursued its prey with mouths anticipantly open. Thus, it follows that we open our mouths to laugh because doing so was once, and still is, associated with a pleasurable activity.

However that may be, it is still true that there is an indivisible relation between pleasure and humor. All

humorists see the joy in life as well as the sorrow. Such a conception of the universe Howells called "humoristic" as he described it in his book, My Mark Twain. "It is," he said, "to feel and think as Heine did, when he cried out from his mattress-grave in Paris,

'O schone Welt, du bist abscheulich!'" [1]

Howells goes on to say that the humorist must have an overpowering sense of the beauty and horror of the world, and of the joy and sorrow of the universe. His sense of the droll and his sense of the dreadful are never far from each other. This explains why Howells claimed that anyone having the temerity to attempt a definition of humor was more likely to "come out the other side with a luminous concept of pathos." [2] Humor is then an acute perception of both joy and sorrow. However, for the purpose of bring out more clearly the distinction between humor and satire, the emphasis of this study shall be laid upon the humorist's joy in life.

The humoristic view of life is not possible to those who can see only its seamy side, such as the complete satirists, who, though they laugh derisively at it, are solely concerned with it. It was not possible in any way to Herman Melville, whose Moby Dick is permeated by the author's profound sense of the evil and malevolence of the world. But it was possible to Howells, to whom life in the aggregate was not black and tragic. Throughout his life he was

[1] W.D.Howells, My Mark Twain (Harper's,N.Y. 1910)p.280

[2] W.D.Howells, An Italian View of Humor (an article in the North American Review Vol.173 p.567)

accustomed to looking at life "in a bizarre temper, yet without airiness or pretension, nay with a whimsical readiness to acknowledge kindred in every droll or laughable thing." [1]

What is the basis for this optimism and eagerness to look always on the brighter side? It may be attributed to two causes; first, Howells' own disposition, and second, his philosophy of life. The first of these, to borrow Voltaire's words, is a natural "gaiety of disposition." Acquired or innate, it so colored its possessor's outlook on life with rosy tints that he could not be satisfied with a view that saw no good either in man or the universe. The pessimistic philosophy that was arising in America during the eighties coincident with its exploitation by the plutocracy, saw only change and painfully little progress in man's life. It impressed the two friends Twain and Howells, but the final deductions of each are antipodal. One has only to contrast the bitter despair of Twains The Mysterious Stranger with the typically Victorian hope and optimism exemplified in the following excerpt from the final page of Howells' novel, The World of Chance, to see that.

"We must own that we often saw the good unhappy and the wicked enjoying themselves. This was not just, yet somehow we felt that we knew that justice ruled the universe. Nothing, then, that seemed chance was really Chance.

[1] W.D.Howells, A Chance Acquaintance, 1873

It was the operation of a law so large that we caught a glimpse of its vast orbit once or twice in a life time. It was Providence."

Though such a view seems almost naive in the light of the great social injustice that existed at the time when Howells' wrote those words, it must be included here in order to understand why Howells' humor remained sweet when Twains turned to bitter satire. Convinced as Twain was that there was no moral law and order in a world where the undeserving sat in the high places, its joys turned to ashes in his mouth. But it was different with Howells. Conceiving the universe to be under the guidance of a divine law of justice, believing that good will ultimately overcome evil, because vice is savage and civilized tendencies are stronger than savage, Howells was eager to enter into the joys of such a world. He says, "I have always loved the world and the pleasures that sages pretend are so vapid." [1]

As for tragedy as opposed to comedy, Howells considered it as merely an incident in our being, having no more vital effect than many storms in the material world. He denied the power of tragedy to alter character as if it were some "spiritual chemistry." [2] That we should by all means have it in fiction as a part of life, he firmly believed; but he also thought that the

[1] R.F.Gregory, The Last (an article in the Fortnightly Review, Vol. 115 p.154

[2] W.D.Howells, The World of Chance, 1893

the study of human character is best pursued in "the normal round, with its endless variety of traits and formative influences, its gentle humor and gentler pathos." [1] As a revelation of character, then, humor was more important than tragedy, which was a momentary arrest of life, in which the situation was supreme and character impulsive.

It was through the expression of his convictions that the "large and cheerful average of healthy and happy life is American" [2] that he drew upon himself a great deal of criticism from The American Mercury which in the nineties saw truer representations of American life in the naturalistic novels of Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris and Henry D. Fuller. Though Howells did not regard America as a Utopia, he did believe that here were "the most untilly aspects of life." [3] It was with these that he was in accord and attuned to.

By these quotations from Howells, I do not wish to minify his evaluation of the tragic. As he says, it is a part of life and as such, he included it in his work. Yet, I think, it is not so much with tragedy as pathos that Howells deals. He had real sympathy for humanity's woes, but he did not often find these woes so very great.

[1] Mr. Howells on Love and Literature, (an article in the Bookbuyer, Vol. 28 p.26

[2] Fen Years After, (an article in the American Mercury, Vol. 20 p. 42, 1930)

[3] Ibid.

In general, Howells' humor is a curious union of contradictions and antipodal qualities. It is the product of both his intellect and emotion, which are justly critical and yet warmly sympathetic. It is humor that judges according to our weaknesses rather than our deserts. Then, it is the truthful representation of life, making use of scenes and incidents that actually occur. It is frankly egoistic, personal in interest, and whimsical in style. Last, it is never far from a sense of the dreadful, seeing both the comedy and the pathos in the Comedie Humaine.

Chapter III

THE HUMOR

There is much spontaneous merriment in Howells' work that has no other aim than to provoke "the loud laugh that speaks the vacant mind." It is frankly conceded to be on a low plane, without high moral aim sanctified by truth. It amuses and that is sufficient.

But there is more than this in Howells. Humorists have always been critics of their times. As a realist, Howells was not blind to the artificies of a period, not too complimentarily dubbed the Gilded Age. He makes the vulgarities of his time the objects of humorous onslaughts, when he is not too busy composing clever epigrams hitting the weaknesses, the self-deceptions and compromises with conscience that are probably timeless. As a painter of manners, Howells was keenly aware of how superficial and external much of the culture of the eighties was. It is in this strain that he describes a Victorian fop.

"He uttered inconceivable vapidities, such as you would expect from none but a man of the highest fashion." [1]

However, it was in men as well as manners that Howells found much to interest him. The world of cowards humbugs, liars and cheaters must be discredited; it was his business to do it. Extravagant and full of the not-

[1] W.D.Howells, Their Wedding Journey, 1872

ley spirit of the carnival, he was nevertheless in dead earnest in the exposure of sham and pretense, with which the great comic characters, the hypocrite, the sentimentalist, the snob and the egoist, flout the world, and a just judgement. As an apostle of nature, the humorist condemns and yet pities those who have set themselves up contrary to it. Most of all, he loves to expose the discrepancy between their false appearance and their true selves.

The humorist deals not only with false characters but with false ideas also. There seem to be many foolish romantic illusions in common circulation with seldom anyone to gainsay them, until the practical common sense of the humorist seizes them to show of what insubstantial stuff they are made. About romantic love therehave arisen quite naturally many false conceptions. Howells' treatment of it is exceedingly realistic; no doubt, because he often treats it humorously. Despite some notable, but I suspect, not infallible opinions to the contrary,[1] Howells' humorous understanding of it is masterly.

[1] "There is in his treatment of the major human emotions a shocking moderation." Ludwig Lewisohn, Expression in America, (Harper, 1932), p. 239

Chapter IV

THE TECHNIC

I propose to make here a brief analysis of Howells' method of treating the humorous in order to ascertain what it is in the humorous which makes us laugh. It might be well, then, to review here briefly a few of the opinions held on this subject by philosophers in the past; for in some of these may be found the partial explanations of why we laugh at Howells' humor. Certain devices and appeals which have been used for many centuries to provoke laughter will be mentioned.

The first of these theories is to be found in Aristotle's Rhetoric. It maintained that the essence of the comic is incongruity, which produces an emotional shock. Our expectations are suddenly disappointed and we laugh. Grotesque deformities or absurd mistakes may be required to disappoint expectations with a sufficient shock to raise a laugh. They are trifling errors with no serious consequences. Naturally, this does not carry us far into the analysis of the varieties of the comic for it does not explain the development of humorous characters, such as Howells' Godolphin and Fulkerson.

The beginning of the second theory that attempted to explain the essence of the comic is to be found in another work of Aristotle's, The Poetics. It was in this treatise that Aristotle defined the ludicrous as "some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive."

Why does the ugly cause the feelings of pleasure that are expressed in the laugh? Hobbes in his Leviathan analyzes the cause to be the favorable contrast between ourselves and a deformed fellow being. Laughter is self-applause. Same Bergson repeats somewhat the idea when he says that laughter is "intended to humiliate" [1] This philosophy is somewhat discredited today, but it has exerted a tremendous influence on earlier writers of the eighteenth century, especially. The comedies of Ben Jonson and Moliere are perhaps the best evidence of the power of this theory to sway men's mind. This is, however, the method of only satire, which provokes only derisive laughter. Obviously, this is not the method of humor.

The third theory and one which most adequately explains the essence of humor was curiously enough originated by a master of satire, Voltaire. It has been discussed under an earlier heading in this study, so not more than a brief mention of it shall be made here. It was he who said, "laughter arises from a gaiety of disposition. It is incompatible with contempt and indignation. Comedy has often been amusing because it is joyous and merry. With such a purpose comedy responds to the joy of life, rather than to the ridicule of inferiority." It is, then, not the method of humor to see only incongruous qualities or relations. Its technic,

[1] H.Bergson, Laughter (Macmillan, 1928) p.197

rather, is an appeal to a stateof mind which is responsive to the joy of life and which prefers to laugh with and not at. Thorndike attributes it to what "the psychologists call the play instinct" [2] This theory is broader and more inclusive than any other which has been ventured yet, since it explains the presence of whimsicality, sympathy, interestin character analysis in humor.

At this point let us consider specifically the Howellsian technic as to what elements it has borrowed from the old and in what ways it is new.

On the lowest plane is the humor in incident, a fact which may explain its wide and popular appeal. It requires little penetration and originality on the part of its author, for thereare already many recognised humorous situations. Conceiveone by imagining the most painful and embarrassing situation that you could place yourself in and then place someone else in it; and the thing is done. The siple humorous situation based on some perception of the incongruous is to be found most often in Howells' one-act farces, that,though they delighted the audiences of the eighties, are as merry and true today as they ever were. In the cold detachment of a summary like this, the swift reprisal that Edward Roberts, the lamb-like, takes upon an innocent guest whom he mistakes for a thief may not sound so funny as

[2] Ashley H. Thorndike, English Comedy, p.12

[1] W.D.Howells, The Garroters, 1886

it actually is, but it is the plot of one of Howells' most successful farces. Besides the incongruous, the grotesque and the ludicrous may frequently be found in the humorous situation. They are somewhat rare in the novels which arededicated to a higher plane of humor. However, the best example of this form of the comic is in A Modern Instance, whereKinney's floury paws baffle his attempts to detain the offended Hartley.

Some of Howells' humor may be explained by the Aristotelian theory of disappointed expectation or emotional shock. As an important fact in the provocation of laughter, it explains why a good joke well-told might be provokingly funny when heard the first time and only provoking when heard the second time. It is the element of the unexpected that enhances the charm of the humorous. Shock then, is the basis of humor, but it is not merely shock. It is the shock of contrasts, which automatically allies it with incongruity. These contrasts may be of many kinds. One of the most common is that of a comic circumstance in a pathetic situation, for,as has been pointed out,comedy and pathos often occur together. As Mark Twain has felicitously said, humor is simply "an oscillation between tears and laughter." When the humorist injects a comic circumstance into a pathetic situation it is because he does not know how to remain long, or will not, in a situation that is dramatic or otherwise serious. An Italian analyst of humor thus describes it:

"He interrupts (the serious situation) brusquely

with some unexpected observation that disorients the ideas and the sensations of the reader and gives them a new direction." [1]

The emotional shock is often due to the common sense of the humorist' observations. It is doubtful that any other human quality has such ironical connotations as this particular one, since no other element seems to be rarer in the nature of things. It is the presence of common sense in the humorist's character that enables him to see things as they really are, an all-important requisiteof those who would write humorously. It is the lack of it that makes the pure comic types, the snob, the sentimentalist and the egoist, the laughing stocks of the humorist. Common senseis the realism that is opposed to the romance that these types spin about themselves. George Meredith contends that it is the essence of comedy, that is the very fountain, "no less sound, because it sparkles."

Howells' humor is like seventeenth century comedy in its absorption in manners. He sees man chiefly in his social relations and it is in these he finds humor. Like Meredith, who defined comedy as a "game played to throw reflections on social life and to deal with human nature in the drawing room of civilized men andwomen where we have no dust of the struggling outer world, no mire, no violent crashesto make the correctness of the

[1] An Italian View of Humor, a review by W.D. Howells on Humor, by Paolo Bellaza (Strenna a Beneficio Del Pio Instituto dei Rachitici, 1900) in the North American Review, Vol.173, p.567

representation convincing."[1] Howells wrote with his mind's eye upon the customs and manners of his time. H is Boston is gone now as completely as the Boston of the Revolution and the Civil War, but he was so successful in capturing a picture of it in his time that it lives a *vita post mortem* in his pages. Of his novels, and his farces, Arthur Quinn has this to say:

"As a picture of the externals of theers they portray, there is nothing to compare with them." [2]

Howells' is predominantly the social historian and the writer of social comedy.

He is especially successful in the humor which he finds in social contrasts. As a man versed in the deepest mysteries of the Victorian social code of Boston, he knew best how to bring out humorously the subtle shades of difference between social classes. Best of these innumerable situations is the famous dinner party of the Coreys for the Lephams in what is probably Howells' best work, The Rise of Silas Lapham. The humor lies in the situation's incongruity. In the irreproachable setting of a Boston drawingroom are committed by a very respectable, elderly business executive the most painful blunders that can be made through social inexperience and a too generous imbibing of the cup that cheers. The scene is high

[1] George Meredith, The Egoist, (Scribner, 1910) p.1

[2] Arthur Quinn, American Drama Since the Civil War

comedy, if viewed objectively.

In the Aristotelian theory of comedy, no room may be found for the development of the humor of character. It is in this respect, especially, that Howells' humor differs from the ancient, as he has created at least a few incomparable portraits of humorous characters. Obviously a series of situation, no matter how humorous, would not be sufficient to sustain interest in a longer work of literature. A humorous novel requires the unifying force of a central character. Howells' novels are almost notorious for their singular lack of incident, depending as they do almost entirely upon character analysis to carry them through. That this dependence is perhaps more a virtue than a fault is the contention of most literary critics, who, whatever, their other many differences of opinion, unite wholeheartedly in the belief that the novel will live only when it bears the author's interpretation of character. This is therefore on a much higher plane. It requires true creative ability and so is more certain to excite true admiration for the writer.

There are many characters in Howells' novels that win regard for themselve, if the reader, as is usually the case, is unconscious of the man who imagined them so real. The masterly thing in A Hazard of New Fortunes is undoubtedly the picture of Fulkerson, a character who interests the student of Mr. Howells as much as he de-

lights the reader unconcerned with technic. H owells generally treats his characters with the marked respect due Bostonians. They are almost always men and women of culture and refinement, possessing a sense of humor, which, in its politeness and urbanity is strangely similar to that of Mr. Howells! But Fulkerson is different from these. Howells can "laugh all around" Fulkerson, "tumble him, roll him about, deal him a smack and drop a tear on him," as Meredith describes the technic of humor.[1] Fulkerson belongs to the great group of sincere and spontaneous humbugs, who are both candid and dissembling. It gave Falstaff to the Elizabethan drama and enriched the modern English novel with one of it most life-like creations, the father in Meredith's novel, The Adventures of Harry Richmond. To this group belongs, also, Godolphin, the temperamental actor in A Story of a Play. He, too, has that curious duality of character, which is the sometimes unhappy possession of all humorous characters. Of an entirely different type from Fulkerson and Godolphin are Bromfield Corey in The Rise of Silas Lapham, an exponent of the conscious, polished wit of the Boston gentleman; Colonel Ellison in A Chance Acquaintance, the owner of a vigorous, virile humor; Basil March, in a series of novels, genial and witty from the first of these to the last; and Bartley Hubbard of A Modern Instance, more the rogue than the scoundrel.

[1] George Meredith, The Idea of Comedy, p. 41

Howells' humor is more noticeable when writing of feminine characters. Laughter at the alleged inconsequence of women is nothing new in literature, but it is not usually, save in Victorian fiction, accompanied by the kindness and reverence that Howells never fails to show. One early Victorian critic has said:

"Women have no cause to be indignant with Howells' kind comprehension of them. What he feels for them is not theexultation of a man who has found them out, nor the pity of a superior being for attractive inferiors, but the sympathy of a man who understands them." [1]

Of course, everyone wishes not so much to be loved as to be understood. The common failing is in being overhasty in assuming that we will be loved if we are understood. At any rate, H owells has created characters whom he has both sympathetically and understandingly p ortrayed with humor. About such women as Kitty Ellison, Mrs. Isabel March and H ope Hawberk, there clings the aura of reality. It is due to the humor with which they are pictured. They seem human because they are humorous.

The medium for the expression of Howells' humor is exclusively his own. Likeall modern humorists, he is frankly and unreluctantly egoistic in style. The eighteenth century cumpulsion to express one's witticisms in heroic couplets no longer holds good, nor does

[1] W.D.Howells and The New School of Fiction (an article in The Nation, Vol. 1, p. 257)

the epigrammatic style of Bacon furnish the sole pattern for good writing. Though Howells modelled his style from the work of Turgeniev and Tolstoi, at least during one period, there is much that has the charm of individuality in his own. The quintessence of this charm is to be found in the wealth of unexpected flashes of "fine things said unintentionally," as Keats said of the Sonnets.

The Comic Spirit is not haphazard; it cannot be expressed in a careless fashion. It deals often with that which is thinnest and most impalpable and must be contained in the smallest terms. The most ordinary mannerism or the slightest gesture may be the object of its oblique glance. For example:

"The colonel looked up with the ferocity that elderly men have to assume in order to keep their glasses from falling off." [1]

For these reasons, it requires, even demands, fastidious expression. In this it is doubtful if any other American writer excells Howells; his style is marked by its unfailing purity and accuracy of diction. Mark Twain has thus correctly analyzed it:

"I do not think that anyone else can play with humorous fancies so gracefully and delicately as he does, nor has so many to play with, nor can come so near making them look as if they were doing the play-

[1] W.D.Howells, A Chance Acquaintance, 1873

ing themselves and he was not aware that they were doing it. For forty years, his English has been to me a continual delight and astonishment....He seems almost always to find that elusive and shifty grain of gold, the right word."

In summary, it may be said that Howells' technic observes these points:

1. In its simplest form, it finds humor in situations or incidents.
2. It depends sometimes upon emotional shock to cause laughter. This shock is produced in several different ways,
   a. The contrast of a comic circumstance in a pathetic situation.
   b. The contrast of social differences.
   c. A practical, common sense observation in an emotional situation.
3. It deals with human nature in the drawingroom.
4. In its highest form, it finds humor in the analysis of character.
5. It depends upon a vivid and fastidious form of expression for,
   a. It is often contained in the smallest terms.

Chapter V

[illegible]

A consideration of Howells' novels and drama will be given here in order to illustrate the general points which have already been noted about his humor and apply those to his works. The novels will be divided under two main headings; The Romantic Comedy and The Domestic Comedy. More discussion will be devoted in each to the comedy of manners in the novels.

His first books have the festal air suited to a young author's honeymoon with the muse, but they are shot through with passages which foreshadow, if they do not foretell, the solemnity which so often clouds the later books. For this reason, the following selection is mainly from the earlier group and deals with a subject of nearly universal interest, romantic love.

A Chance Acquaintance	1873
April Hopes	1886
An Open-Eyed Conspiracy	1897

THE ROMANTIC COMEDIES

A Chance Acquaintance

Howells first novel, A Chance Acquaintance, was one of the most delightful social comedies of the nineteenth century. The humor is at time light and fantastic; at other times, serious and socially significant. Strangely enough, its slight love plot is but the setting for an intensive study of a pure comic type, the snob.

A snob is one who has for wealth and social distinction a regard all out of proportion to their real value. Snobbery is most strking in the comfortable middle class, for the poor man is beneath hope and pretense and the rich man can afford to be magnanimous. But the well-to-do citizen with every want supplied save that which springs from vanity, has for his chief business in life the cultivation of "society."

As Bergson says, "The comic character is generally comic in proportion tohis ignorance of himself."[1] That is why Mr. Arburtanis a prize comic type. To make his affectation and hollow show reveal themselves the more startlingly, he is cast in the curious role of the ardent wooer of young girl brought up on the democratic principles of the West. She quitecxpertly analyzes Mr. Arburton as "the mere husk of well-dressed culture and good manners." Again, "He is all silk umbrella and gloves." The climax of the story occurs when Mr. Arburton's lack of true refinement is betrayed into a

[1] H.Bergson, Laughter (Macmillan, 1928) p. 17

a final and fatal exhibition of vulgarity that lies in wait for exaggerated refinement. From the romantic point of view, the story is not particularly a happy one. Yet, without a doubt, Kitty's rejection of Mr. Arburton is the common sense solution. It is, perhaps, the triumph of the democratic spirit, which is characteristic of the spirit of comedy.

April Hopes

This story, too, is more than the delineation of a slight love plot. It is an acute study of another of the true comic types, the egoist. The heroine, Alice Pasmer, like Sir Willoughby Patterne of George Meredith's The Egoist, is afflicted with the same blind self-interest that motivates "her best impulses towards others with a view to their final end in herself." She too, is ignorant of her true self and is comic proportionately. Unknown to herself, her continuous renunciations of love are motivated purely and simply by a desire for self-exaltation. She masquerades as an unselfish, generous girl, whereas in reality she knows no satiety in the demands she makes upon others. She clothes her selfishness in her thoughts and speech in the language of sentimentality, for, as is often the case with the refined egoist, she is also an sentimentalist. It is the difference between her mask and her real face that Howells, not without some pity for her, exposes.

An Open-Eyed Conspiracy

With the usual Howellsian perspective, this story treats the comedy of love as it is seen with the eyes of middle age. The touch is so Austenian in its delicacy, gentle irony and common sense, that it might easily have been renamed Sense and Sensibility. In the main, the book is a complete comedy of manners and a tireless commentary on Victorian society in America. If I should say that Howells literally observed everything, I should be afraid that even then I should be understating his method. For the greater part of the novel, the author's attention is engaged with questions of social propriety, minute to the unpracticed eye but momentous to the practiced one.

As for the plot, it is woven about a pretty love affair that blossoms under the gentle care of the middle-aged Marches. The lovers themselves occupy the background for the hourly conjugal disputes between the older couple as to what they should do about the younger people. The discuss it continually, but actually do nothing. The cream of the jest lies in the fact no matter what they might have done, nothing they could do could alter the situation, because the whole affair has evidently been out of their hands since the moment after their first guilty impetus to it.

THE DOMESTIC COMEDIES

Very few phases of life seem to lend themselves so well to the kindly treatment of the humorist as the domestic. The comedies in the novel form which Howells has created from it are composed of scenes and situations that actually occur in real life. Humor is almost always present, adding to the reality of the interpretation; for wherever there is humor, there is, if not reality itself, a sense of reality. Howells enters into them more in the spirit of the participant than in that of the observer. As such, he has succeeded in making a skillful, tactful study of marriage; and what is more important, a truthful, realistic representation of it.

The novels to be considered here are:

Their Wedding Journey	1872
The H oward of New Fortunes	1889
The Rise of Silas Lapham	1884
The Story of a Play	1898

Their Wedding Journey

This is Howells' first novel and quite naturally of the picaresque type, bearing, however, slight resemblance to most of its kindred. It relates the slight incidents of a trip, such as depend upon the changes of weather, the heroine's temperament which is equally mutable; and it includes such events as buying tickets, waiting for trains and paying homage to haughty hotel clerks.

It is mainly devoted to the observation of manners. Howells talks of some ordinary traits of American life as these appeared to his travellers and presents now a bit of landscape and now a sketch of character. One very human touch is Howells' discription of the first quarrel of the newly married couple, who are the chief characters in the book. It rages in its fury for exactly five minutes until first the pathos and then the absurdity of it overwhelms Basil. He returns properly contrite to the room which he had left at the height of his anger; at his entrance, "Isabel rises with a smile from the ruins of her life amidst which she had heartbrokenly sat down with all her things on."

The Hazard of New Fortunes

If for any reason this story should regainpopularity, it should be because of the masterly portrayal of one of its chief characters, Fulkerson. He belongs to the group of sincere and spontaneous hum-

bugs, who deceive no one but themselves and are proportionately comic. Of Fulkerson, another character in the story has this to say:

"He is a naturally generous and right minded creature, but life has taught him to truckle and trick like the rest of us."

The supreme unconsciousness of the left hand for what the right hand doeth is Fulkerson's outstanding characteristic, a trait common to all the great comic characters.

One of the masterly touches of high comedy in the story is the delineation of dinner party almost as catastrophic as the Corey-Lapham affair . It would have been less so if it had followed the lines of all successful gatherings, where the participants "allow one another to talk uninterruptedly all the time and... then go home with the highest mutual respect." Unfortunately, at this dinner a little listening occurs and the wealthy host overhears himself described at his own table in German--which he understands--as "an infamous traitor." The result is imaginable.

The Rise of Silas Lapham

There are many varieties of humor here; some are tart and piquant, while others are soothing and mellow. There is shrewd, dry Yankee wit; polished, suave, and urbane Boston wit; and the teasing, roguish humor of a young girl.

The domestic part of this comedy concerns the

life of Mr. and Mrs. Lapham, who discover the advantages and hazards of wealth; enter society once and disastrously; and emerge from their final financial misfortunes with peace of mind.

The romantic side of the comedy constructs the ancient triangle on unusual and amusing lines. An absurd mistake supplies the obstacles in the path of true love. Of two sisters, one beautiful and the other clever, Tom Corey selects the latter as the object of his sincere, if benighted, affection. Unfortunately, no one can believe that he has not chosen the former, because, as everyone knows, the Victorians looked for the most part with stern disapproval upon cleverness in women. Tom's parents, in fact, view his choice as a kind of catastrophe, while Penelope's parents steadfastly refuse to believe. All in all, the spirit of humor furnished a strong motivation for the story.

The Story of a Play

Howells never surpassed the exquisitequality of this novel in any other work. Though he retained his humorous attitude toward the world and the children of it, he never again reached the real heart of human experience. The shades in his pictures grew more uniform and they no longer possessed the sharp contrasts of pathos and humor, of acute misery and exquisite happiness.

The character analysis of the dramatis personae, Brice and Louise Maxwell, is excellently done with touches

of keen humor. Maxwell is the more wholly intellectual type. He cannot see the"ridicule in dear eyes" without occasionally becoming chilled by it. He therefore indulges now and then in a vein of sarcasm that does little to increasehis marital happiness or add to his popularity with his wife's high-bred friends. But even to this superior intellect are the inconsistencies of feminine character baffling. Up to a certain point, Brice finds his wife "as frank and candid as a man," but beyond that point "the eternal womanly began and he could make nothing of her. She evaded and came and went and returned upon her course and all with as good a conscience apparently as if she were meeting him fairly and frankly on the question they started with." To Louise, too, belongs that curious duality of nature that is characteristic of the humorous character.

Godolphin, the erratic actor, deserves equal attention. Though lacking Fulkerson's mischievous sense of humor, he is truly as much a comic character as Fulkerson. He has a frank and open nature that is yet full of suspicion; a chaotic generosity that is side by side with an almost child-like selfishness; and a mercurial quality that makes him act one way today and another tomorrow.

The plot is remarkable for the singular number of coincidences which occur without perturbing the imperturbable Mr.Howells, even if they so affect the reader

Howells, however, does present an amazingly truthful representation of marriage. After six months of wedded bliss, if Brice had "allowed himself to face the fact, he must have owned that though they loved each other truly, and he had knownmoments of exquisite , of incredible rapture, he had been as little happy as in any half year he had lived." It is hardly the conventional picture, but it imparts the feeling of its truthfulness; and there is something rather humorous in it, too. The tendency which it exhibits toward insistent and painful analysis is characteristic of the method of humor. Bellasa says:

"The humorist so woos, so desires pain that the most atrocious pang becomes for him a source of satisfaction and delight." [1]

And so, even when Howells feels deeply the pathos of the bitterness that is only gotten from the very innermost sweetness of life,"he jokes about it and makes it the argument of pleasantries and epigrams." [2]

[1] The Italian View of Humor, W.D.Howells (an article in the North American Review, Vol. 173, p.567)

[2] Ibid.

THE FARCES AND COMEDIES

It can safely be said that Howells wrote the best social comedy produced by an American during the nineteenth century. His plays enjoyed immense popularity though they never netted their author anything but the satisfaction of writing them, for they never got upon the public stage except for "the noble ends of charity." Booth Tarkington says:

"Probably every elderly amateur in the country has played in some of his farces, but one need not to be elderly to have done that; these gaieties of his are as merry and true today as they ever were. How they did go over the country as they came out! They began to be acted everywhere within a week or two of publication... Few things were surer." [1]

Howells has written four comedies and sixteen prose farces. There is one lyricated farce, or a farce in verse with musical accompaniment, that is especially interesting in the resemblance it bears to the current Walter Disney's Silly Symphonies. There was real gold in the vein which Howells worked and from which he secured only the virtuous feeling that comes from donating one's labors to "the noble ends of charity."

The comedies are three-act plays, longer and less successful than the farces, which are far more enjoyable reading.

In general, they may be characterized thus:

1. They are social comedies written in prose,

[1] B.Tarkington, W.D.Howells, (Harper's Magazine, 141:346)

with one exception.

2. The development of humorous incident , though important is not so much as the development of character.

3. This incident is usually one that procures response through either a misunderstanding or a deception.

4. The dialogue is sparkling and brilliant.

5. They are constructed with artistic care and thought.

6. They abound in protracted comic situations that can be turned pathetic side uppermost.

The comedy of manners throws reflections upon social life and so is called social comedy. Howells was master of this form of art, often described as one of the most difficult to become adept in. He tirelessly comments on every detail of Boston social life, and relates how ostentatious dress, talk and talk. ress especially interested hi . His own attitude toward it w s unvaryingly respectful. So late as 1916 he conceded without irony that "the art of dressing well or fashionably comes f om deep and earnest study." His work reveals the extent of his application.

Howells remarks in Years of My Youth, a book of much human interest, that his father read eighteenth century literature regularly in the family circle when Howells was a boy. No doubt it was this influence that turned his eyes toward the observation of the manners of the society of his day. They were much different from

that other period whose manners have been graphically detailed by its dramatists, the Restoration. Needless to say, Victorian Boston was the acme of civilized society. No other time or locality has ever valued more the appearance of external decorum than the Boston of the eighties. And probably no other time has valued this less than the Restoration. This accounts for the chief difference between the brilliant comedies which each has produced. The writers of comedy have always been the mirrors of their times.

Then, too, Howells' humor is greatly unlike cavalier wit, which "like the sword of the cavalier in the Mall, was accustomed to flash out upon slight provocation and for a similar office--to wound." [1] There is, on the other hand, no trace of grossness, meanness or bitterness in Howells' laughter. It is kindly, genial and sympathetic.

[1] G. Meredith, The Idea of Comedy, p.7

THE FARCES

More than any other type of writing, Howells' farces depend for amusement upon situations rather than character interest; but not even here are the former supreme nor does character remain impassive. Like the novels, these one-act plays are related by the continuous appearance and reappearance of the same dramatis personae. They are Amy and Edward Roberts, Agnes and Willis Campbell, who are kindly, worldly people who live in the fashionable world of Boston. Each of them is distinguished by some common humorous trait; in Amy Roberts, it is a volubility of speech, just as humorous now as when Shakespeare made use of it in the character of the nurse in Romeo and Juliet. In Edward Roberts, it is the absent-mindedness that is almost proverbially attributed to literary men. Amy's naivete is a foil to her brother Willis's thornless, and sometimes pointless, wit. Edward, Amy and Agnes are Bostonese, but Willis is national; his humor is as broad as the western plains from which he "hails." Agnes is both her husband's supplement and complement. By appearing to repress her husband's funny speeches, she spurs him on to greater efforts. All, in all, it is a charming circle of comfortable, amiable people, somewhat worldly but thoroughly human.

The following plays will be considered:

A Likely Story	1884
The Mouse-Trap	1885
A Letter of Introduction	1892

A Likely Story

This is a true comedy of errors. In it, Howells realizes the excellent farcical use to which a missent letter may be put. He divines with considerable skill the amusing complications which are more than certain to arise when that letter, expressing the greatest regard for its recipient, is directed through a mistake into the hands of an innocent and much bewildered married lady, who expects from the sender a much less personal reply to a formal invitation. When these private and tender sentiments change hands not merely once but three times within the brief period of a half hour, the suspense is imaginable. Though it employs the ancient comic devices of disappointing expectation by means of an absurd mistake and of repetition, it is characterized by typically H owellsian humor.

Joking in the face of the most disastrous possibilities, such as disrupted friendships and broken engagements, is a peculiar habit of the humorist, especially the American humorist. The comic situation in the play could easily have been turned pathetic side uppermost and the disastrous possibilities just mentioned could have been realized had Howells cared to give that turn to the events. Evidently, the humorist's sense of the droll is never far from his sense of the dreadful.

The Mouse-Trap

The audiences who attended the presentation of this farce must certainly have left the theatre with their ears ringing, for it is the noisiest and most boisterous of Howells' repertoire.

It is based on the amusing paradox of the mouse trapping instead of the mouse trapped. Simple incongruity characterizes its setting. Picture seven dignified Bostonian ladies in a sedately furnished drawing room precariously perched on piano stools, tables, and chairs, forgetting everything in their abject terror of a mouse. Deception, the common basis of farcical plots, motivates the action , for the mouse is a pure fiction created by Willis Campbell as a "merrie jest." When it is discovered, his fiancee' from her perch on thepiano stool metes out swift and severe judgement. It is unfortunate, however, that a revolving stool is no place to make a stand, no matter how righteous.

Obviously, this is slight material to build a play upon, but it is characteristic of humor to find its occasion in everything, even that which is thinnest and most impalpable. "Humor is truly...that which can be contained in the smallest terms. Nothing is too little." [1]

[1] Ibid. p.41

A Letter of Introduction

In contrast to the boisterous play just considered, this is a suave, social comedy. In its comparatively subdued pages, no terrified ladies dash simultaneously screaming from a mouse-infested room, nor does Willis Campbell add to the effectiveness of their dramatic departure by thrashing the floor in wild abandon with a stove poker. In fact, the scene is decidedly quieter--or would be, if it were not for Amy's amazing powers of speech. The author, himself, represses with more or less success the noisier of his merry outbursts and applies himself to painting the manners of society.

In its slight plot, the reader expects the exposure of a mistake made by the main character and is of course at the conclusion fortunately disappointed. Evidently, then, the Aristotelian devices of disappointed expectation and the absurd mistake are utilized. Both humor in incident and character development are present and handled skillfully.

As for the technic, much of the humor can be found in the stage directions, which give a continuity to the play that is almost Shavian. Howells does not resort to time-dishonored devices to fill space, waste time and exasperate the reader. Instead, he weaves his sprightly, spontaneous comments into the thread of the story till it becomes almost a short story instead of a play.

COMEDY

Of the four comedies, Out of the Question (1877), A Counterfeit Presentment (1877), A Previous Engagement (1897) and An Indian Giver (1900), the second surpasses the others in its balance, proportion and unity. It is, moreover, the most representative of Mr. Howells' humor at its best, containing, as it does, an analysis of the vivid, humorous character of Mr. Bartlett.

He is, without question, the personality who makes the play. He secures the real interest of the reader by his unexpected flashes of quick and ready repartee, his fascinating outbursts of temper and his equally charming attempts to atone for them. It is the charms of this joker that turn out to be the only means of extricating the foolish heroine from the toils of an unhappy love, which was about to make her an interesting pathological case. Such is the healthful and recuperative power of humor. Thorndike says:

"The profounder emotional appeal may be reserved to tragedy, but the ministrations of comedy are to be viewed as essential to emotional health and spiritual sweetness." [1]

The dialogue is all that any reader would desire in a comedy of manners. Flowing, witty and sparkling, it matches any to be found in Restoration drama, but like it, its only flaw is its flawlessness. Unfortunately, reality is sacrificed to brilliant expression. In spite

[1] Ashley Thorndike, English Comedy, p. 15

of this superabundance of goodness, Howells' comedy has many virtues to recommend it; without a doubt it is the most successful of his lengthier flirtations with the Comic Muse.

Chapter VI

THE SIGNIFICANCE

It is my purpose here primarily to answer the question of what value a study of Howells' humor can have .

First of all, it can discover the true essence of the character of the man, for it is a revelation of those qualities of sympathy and humanity which are not always associated with him. He is too often mistakenly thought of as a dull representative of the Victorian middle-class; but a study of humor reveals that it knows no class lines and that it is always democratic. Oscar Firkins says in his excellent biography of Howells:

"You are safe from becoming an aristocrat, literary or social, if every other man you meet on the pavement, in tatters or in broadcloth, exhales a humor which you helplessly and incorrigibly love." [1]

That Howells is unappreciated now is partly due to the general failure to appreciate the humor which was the chief means of showing his traits of humanity and sympathy. There may be other ways to show Howells' humanity, but I can think of no truer one than that he writes with humor.

Secondly, a study of humor can show /that there is a close relationship between it and realism, and that Howells' reputation as a realist owes a debt to his gift of humor. Humorous writings are absolutely true discriptions of

[1] W.D.Howells, Oscar Firkins (Harvard Uni.Press,1924) p. 322

scenes and incidents really occurring. The sense of moving life that is always present in Howells' work may then be attributed partially, at least, to humor. Wherever it is, there is, if not reality itself, a sense of reality. After all, both humor and realism strive to present truth and actuality; the province of both is human nature; their mutual aim is discovery; and their common method is observation. Howells' cry was ever:

"Ah, poor real life which I love, can I make others share the delight I find in thy foolish and insipid face! " [1]

Third, it can refute the charge that Howells' work is superficial because he is a painter of manners. [2] For he is more than this; as any just evaluation of his skill in character analysis will show his very shrewd and intelligent knowledge of men. To write with humor, Howells had to have it as it is the province of humor. The aim of the Comic Spirit is the exposure of sham and pretense which would not exist if they were easy to see through. The delineation of the superficial would not then be sufficient; the humorist must have a real insight into human character. Howells' work is ample proof. His work is not shallow, if the Comic Spirit is not shallow and that I think goes without saying. Montrose J. Moses thus summarizes it:

1 W.D.Howells, Their Wedding Journey, 1872

2 Constance O'Rourke, American Humor (Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1931) p. 164

"The Comic Spirit is not easy to grasp, is not shallow, is not haphazard. One must be very near to life in order to feel it and must have asked one's self questions regarding the eternal verities." [1]

[1] Montrose J. Moses, American Dramatists (Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1911), p. 272

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